

Externalizing

A source-faithful reflection resource for noticing a fast blame conclusion, widening the picture, and choosing what to do next.

Start here. This adapted companion preserves the supplied worksheet's content while adding context where a statement could otherwise sound diagnostic or certain. Use it with one recent, manageable situation. You may pause, pass, or return later.

1 SOURCE CONTEXT · AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

What can happen quickly

"When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we've often just had an automatic thought. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we're not even aware we've had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate."

How the worksheet places them

"They are often *exaggerated, biased, distorted, or unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly."

Notice

A strong feeling or quick conclusion may be present before you have had time to examine it.

Map

Consider the situation, other people's actions, your own choices, and what is still uncertain.

Choose

Try one language shift or one fair next step. A thought need not be forced into positivity.

A brief check-in

A recent, manageable moment I might use in this reflection:

What was I feeling (for example, fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness)?

Balanced responsibility and safety. A fuller picture does not mean that everyone is equally responsible. Looking at your own choices does not mean accepting blame for another person's harmful behavior, coercion, discrimination, abuse, or unsafe conduct. If this example feels too intense, orient to the present and seek individualized support.

Editorial context: Automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions are useful CBT teaching concepts, not diagnoses. Reframing can support flexible reflection, but it does not settle facts, remove a real problem, or guarantee relief.

What the source calls **externalization**

Keep the original description visible; treat its terminology and broad problem list as a starting point for reflection rather than a verdict about you.

Source definition. “Externalization (or ‘defensive attribution’) is a style of thinking where you blame others for negative events and avoid taking personal responsibility. The reasons for this might include protecting your self-esteem, justifying your actions, or coping with difficult feelings like shame. While it might seem helpful, externalizing can have a negative impact on you and your relationships, and stop you addressing your difficulties.”

Context for this edition: The title is retained, but “externalization” and “defensive attribution” are related terms rather than interchangeable clinical labels. Possible functions are not known motives. This can be a pattern to notice, not a diagnosis, trait, or excuse for another person’s harm.

2 FOUR EXAMPLES FROM THE SOURCE

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“She made me do it.”

“He provoked me, so what I did is OK.”

“They’re to blame for this.”

Notice an example without making it a verdict

One source example that I recognize as a thought I could have:

What facts, feelings, or unanswered questions might I add before acting?

Source statement: “Externalizing is common across a wide range of problems:”

Addictions

Anger

Anxiety

Complicated grief

Chronic pain

Depression

Narcissism

Paranoia

Perfectionism

PTSD

Relationship problems

Shame

Stress

Important qualification: This is the source’s list, preserved for completeness. It is **not** a checklist, diagnosis, explanation of cause, or basis for deciding that any condition applies. Research on blame and attributions differs by condition, context, and measure; this worksheet cannot show whether a person has any listed problem.

Try a less shaming label

Instead of “I am an externalizer,” you might notice: **“I am having a strong urge to put all of the responsibility outside myself.”**

Keep a fairness check

Ask: **“What responsibility belongs to whom, and what facts still matter?”** The answer may be uneven or not yet clear.

Notice and **label**

The source begins by catching a thought as it arises. Practice observing it; you do not have to argue with it immediately.

Noticing and labeling — original source instruction

“The first step in overcoming externalization is catching it. Practice self-monitoring so that you get better at noticing these thoughts as they arise. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:”

• “I’m externalizing again.”

• “There’s another externalization.”

Optional language update: If those phrases sound self-critical, keep the noticing function and try: “There is that blame thought again,” or “I am noticing a strong external explanation.” This edit does not require you to agree with the thought, blame yourself, or erase someone else’s role.

3 SELF-MONITORING WORKSHEET

One manageable moment

☐ **Situation:** What happened? Use a few concrete facts, not a conclusion about character or intent.

☐ **Strong feeling(s):** What did you notice in emotion or body?

☐ **Quick thought:** What did your mind say, exactly or approximately?

☐ **Label it gently:** “I am noticing...”

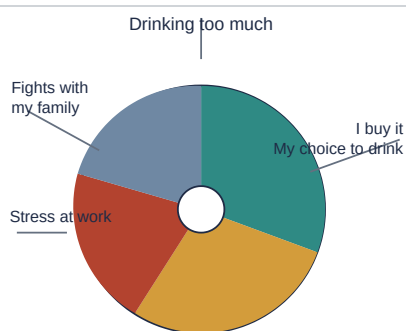
Permission to pace. Noticing a thought is not the same as admitting fault. If you become flooded, stop here. A small, specific example is enough; details of trauma or conflict are not required for this exercise.

Consider other causes

Make room for a fuller account without assuming equal responsibility or using a chart to decide who is to blame.

“Negative events rarely have a single cause. Rather than blaming someone else, list all the things that may have contributed to it (including yourself). You could use a pie chart to explore how influential each factor was.”

Context for this edition: Treat this as a prompt to look for multiple contributors, not a rule. Some events have a clear primary cause. Responsibility may be unequal, and a pie chart cannot determine facts or safety.



Original chart labels

- Drinking too much
- Fights with my family
- Stress at work
- I buy it / My choice to drink

The recreated graphic keeps the source relationships and labels. Slice size is illustrative; it is not a measured allocation of responsibility.

My contributor map

Name factors first. If you want, add an approximate influence later. You can write “unknown” where you do not have enough information.

Other people's actions or choices

My choices, limits, needs, or responses

Circumstances, demands, timing, or stressors

What is still unknown, disputed, or needs checking?

What is one fair, safe next step within my influence?

Shift language. Weigh options.

These final source practices invite more flexible wording and an honest look at the short- and longer-term effects of several possible stances.

4 MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

“Changing the words you use in externalizing thoughts can help you think more flexibly, take more responsibility, and defuse intense emotions.”

SOURCE MOVE	SOURCE LANGUAGE SHIFT
Own your experience	“She makes me angry” > “I feel angry”
Be less extreme in your judgments	“He is to blame” > “He is partly to blame”
Swap blame for a preference	“She should have” > “I’d prefer it if she ...”

One phrase I want to make more accurate, less extreme, or more clearly mine:

5 PROS AND CONS

Source instruction.

“Externalizing is a choice. Make a list of the pros and cons of blaming others versus the different attitudes you could have. Ask yourself:”

- “What are the pros and cons of blaming someone else for this?”
- “What are the pros and cons of taking responsibility for this?”
- “What are the pros and cons of accepting the situation without judgment?”

Context:

The wording “is a choice” is retained as source language. Automatic thoughts can arise quickly; the more practical choice point may be what you do next. “Taking responsibility” never means accepting blame for another person’s harmful behavior.

Blaming someone else

Possible short-term pros / protection

Possible costs / later effects

Taking responsibility for my part

Possible short-term pros / protection

Possible costs / later effects

Accepting the situation without judgment: What might this offer, and what would it not require me to accept?

Source and rights notice:

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